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CHRISTIANITY AND THE MYSTERY RELIGIONS

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"That he might gather together in one all things in Christ." That is Paul's interpretation of God's cosmic plan. It is an interpretation of human history that breeds religious enthusiasm. Our religion is not an isolated, appended device, but the supreme phase of God's dealings with his world.

With this Pauline philosophy in view we should expect to find in Christianity exactly what we do find, viz., survivals of other religions, bits of Grecian philosophy, the Hebrew theology, and the passionate religious hope of the Orient. True, taken all together they do not make Christianity any more than bits of matter make a human personality, but to understand Christianity it is necessary to understand something of this marvelous "gathering together of all things in Christ." Recent study in the mystery religions is one of such methods. Professor Case's article narrates facts which will be of great value to the student of Christianity.

How did Christianity originate? Was it at the outset a full-grown entity; or did it develop gradually, the process of development being determined, as in the case of all genuine growth, by environmental forces? This is a very difficult question to answer, not only because our information about the early days of the new religion is all too scanty, but because that religion has been so generally defined as a static quantity of doctrine, conduct, or ritual rather than a vital expression of religious experience.

We are becoming quite used to thinking of modern Christianity in terms of the religious life of individuals and communities. We are leaving the cloister and going to the market-place, believing that there we shall find religion at its best because we find it there in the making. We concede that the con-

ditions of life surrounding the children of today will have much to do with determining the religious fiber of the men of tomorrow. And any faith which does not adjust itself to present-day methods of thinking, and is not worked out in vital touch with the great human problems of today, no longer represents for us the highest type of Christianity in our modern world.

Yet there is still a widespread disposition to maintain that primitive Christianity was free from this sort of determining influence. Prompted by a worthy desire to preserve its sacredness, we isolate it from all natural relationships and treat it as a wholly foreign insert into human history. But it may be that this well-meant apologetic effort is not so creditable to our faith as we had on first thought imagined. If we believe that Christianity today should draw

upon all sources of inspiration available in modern life, why should we so religiously strive to make primitive Christianity a purely other-worldly product? Will it not gain rather than lose in significance if we discover that even in the first century its foundations were as broad and its inspirations as wide as those of life itself? We may be doing the new religion a grave injustice by insisting that it was a restricted revelation received through a single channel, rather than a movement which united and enlarged in its own life other streams of inspiration already flowing in the ancient world.

From this point of view the question of early Christianity's relation to other religions becomes a purely historical one. If the probability of this relationship is discovered it will not in the least diminish our estimate of Christianity's worth nor will the new religion gain in significance if we find that such relationship is altogether improbable. With this understanding we may turn at once to our first main problem: Was contact with other religions so close, and of such a character, that it is likely to have affected the lives of the early Christians?

In the first place, one might fairly question whether it was at all possible for them, in view of their belief in Christianity's superiority, to derive anything from other sources. Undoubtedly they felt themselves to be advocates of the only true faith. Paul not only condemns both paganism and Judaism, but he anathematizes those who preach any type of Christianity different from his own. He sharply criticizes the Jews for their unprofitable legalism and their refusal to acknowledge Jesus' lordship.

Though highly praising Judaism as a historic revelation, Paul feels it to be only a preliminary stage of religious history designed to pass away with the advent of Christianity. The wisdom of the Greeks is set aside as utterly worthless and doomed to destruction, while the popular religion of the gentile world is condemned for its immorality, its senseless idolatry, and its demoniacal character. Other Christians may not have held views identical in all respects with Paul's, yet in the main his opinions are probably fairly representative, particularly with respect to paganism.

These sweeping condemnations were to be expected under the circumstances. No competing religious movement could, as such, be allowed favorable comparison with Christianity. Formal criticism must in the nature of the case be wholesale. Since all other religions are held to be erroneous in principle and inferior in practice, the Christian critic does not stop to note items of value amid masses of alleged error. But it would hardly be safe to conclude from this doctrinaire attitude of the critic that valuable elements were not recognized on occasion, or that many such values were not actually absorbed by Christianity. Rarely does a victor fail to profit from contact with, and conquest over, a competitor, even though the latter's possessions are, in the heat of conflict, pronounced quite worthless. We know, for example, that Paul's formal criticism of the Jews did not deter him from retaining so much of Judaism as seemed to him valuable and suitable to the purposes of his new propaganda, nor did his condemnation of the Gentiles prevent him from recognizing that they might please

God by living according to the dictates of conscience. Opposition to other faiths as systems of religion did not necessarily prohibit the actual appropriation of worthy aspirations, noble ideals, or useful ideas from the contemporary world.

This process was further abetted by the idea that Christianity was the legitimate heir of all goodness which had previously existed. If Judaism or paganism held anything that seemed estimable, this without further ado was credited in Christianity's favor. Paul feels that not only his pre-Christian career but the entire Old Testament dispensation and the whole course of past history have been ordered with reference to the establishment of Christianity, and so form a proper part of its content in so far as Paul is able to make these things fit into his scheme of thinking. Similarly Justin Martyr after his conversion retains his high estimate of Greek philosophy by persuading himself that Heraclitus, Socrates, and many Stoics were virtually Christians since they had been enlightened by the Logos later to be more perfectly revealed in the person of Christ. According to the psychology of that day the supremacy and uniqueness of Christianity were adequately maintained by believing that items appropriated from other religions had been rescued from a false setting and restored to their divinely intended position in the new faith.

This situation is not materially changed when we recognize that Christians felt themselves divinely guided in the establishment of the new movement. The thought of a formal and completed revelation was hardly so prominent

in the consciousness of the first missionaries as to constitute a totally impassable barrier between them and their contemporaries. Before the New Testament canon was definitely fixed the conception of revelation was much more elastic than in the later period. In fact, its very content was a product of experience. Judaism indeed was believed to offer a genuine historic revelation which guaranteed certain items of the new faith, but it did not furnish—at least not in the thought of Paul—a complete equipment for Christianity. This task had not been accomplished even by Jesus himself. Certain gaps remained to be filled in by believers from their own world of experience, and they courageously set about this undertaking, in all good conscience accounting themselves worthy on the ground of their belief in Christ, to equip the new faith with all features needful for the proper expansion of its life. This work, to be sure, was done under the direction of the divine spirit, but the result was a matter of immediate experience, its character and content being determined by the religious impulses of living Christians. Since their convictions were a product of actual life and since their experience matured under the pressure of new problems arising out of the particular circumstances in which they found themselves, we must guard against reading into the thinking of early believers the views of later generations who so objectivized and hardened the conception of revelation that it became the historically unconditioned source of all details in organization, ritual, and dogma which emerged with the gradual growth of the Christian society.

Not only did the attitude of the first Christians permit influence from other religions, but their situation must have tended to make such influence a significant factor in their lives. Perhaps we do not always realize that Christianity arose in a "very religious" world, and so we may not appreciate the significance of these surroundings for the genesis of the new movement. Its ultimate triumph has been so brilliant that we may imagine it was always the same dominant and self-sufficient religion which it is in our day. Even when the existence of its original competitors is recognized, their popularity and strength may be greatly discounted. The religions of the Roman Empire in the first century A.D. were not so completely decadent as we sometimes imagine. That was in reality a period of remarkable religious activity in which various types of faith spread themselves over the Mediterranean world. The strength and extent of Judaism are well known, but the Gentiles were hardly less religious in their own way than were the Jews. Paganism offered men the help of many different deities with a variety of doctrines and ceremonies designed to meet the needs of different classes of worshipers. Religion was a subject of general interest. It occupied a large place in the life of the common man, it was widely discussed by poets and philosophers, and even the state claimed to be established upon a religious basis.

The early Christians were in very close touch with this general situation even outside Palestine. Their very circumstances compelled contact with other faiths, a contact so close and so long continued that it at once suggests the

probability of important genetic relationships between the new religion and its contemporaries. However extensively the former may abound in original features, one must admit that in childhood it was rocked in a Jewish cradle and that it grew to maturity in a gentile home. Its Jewish connections no one will dispute, but we must also remember that at an early date it was transferred to gentile lands. Long before the first century closed, the chief centers of Christian activity had moved from Palestine to Syrian Antioch, Ephesus, Corinth, Rome, and possibly to Alexandria. All of these cities were strongholds of paganism with which Christianity was thus brought into close contact during the impressionable period of youth.

Nor did the contemporary religions fade away quietly before the new propaganda. On the contrary, they offered a stout resistance. It would be a grave mistake to suppose that the adherents of all other faiths were generally dissatisfied with their own religion. Just as Jehovah retained the allegiance of his chosen people, so the pagan deities had not only loyal followers but in some instances also energetic missionaries. Consequently we must not think that the Christian evangelists cultivated purely virgin soil, for in reality they worked fields already occupied by formidable competitors. Certainly at no time within the first century could it be said that the new religion had so completely displaced other faiths, or had so thoroughly isolated itself, as to make their influence an item of no possible consequence for its own life.

Since the missionaries were thus forced to compete for a place in occupied

territory they were not at liberty to create all religious data *de novo*. Their audiences were composed of people who had already worked out an extensive religious vocabulary, who gave much attention to the observance of traditional rites, and who thought in terms of certain generally accepted ideas. While the Christian preachers doubtless could not have won converts without proclaiming the newness and superiority of their message, still their prospects for success would probably have been slight had they not used the terminology which was familiar to their hearers and shown that the new religion, however novel and self-sufficient it might claim to be, conserved and enhanced the values of the old. The latter could not be totally ignored if Christianity was to meet, as its advocates manifestly intended it should, the same practical religious demands which its predecessors had, inadequately according to the Christian interpretation, sought to satisfy. Under these circumstances it was necessary for the Christian preacher to state his message in the religious language and thought-forms of the age. This pragmatic necessity may easily though perhaps often unconsciously have led Christians to enrich experience and evolve new ideas through the aid of contemporary religions.

This possibility is further strengthened by the fact that Christianity developed some of its important characteristics in response to the exigencies of expansion. It was necessary to make adjustments to new situations. At first the community seemed to think of itself chiefly as a messianic company of orthodox Jews, but Jewish rejection of its

messianic teaching gradually forced the development of an independent organization. The practical demands of gentile missions also compelled a change of attitude toward the ceremonial law, a change to which some Palestinians strenuously objected. But the gentile forces prevailed. And ultimately the realistic Jewish eschatology, so dominant in the early days, had to be recast and the religious values which it embodied restated in other terms to correspond with the actual course of history and the more stable circumstances in which gentile Christians found themselves.

Furthermore, the membership of the churches in this formative period consisted mainly of converts from other faiths. Christianity was not yet old enough to have trained up men from youth within its own communion. In the early days very little attention was given to the children, doubtless because it seemed improbable that they would have time to grow to manhood before the end of the world should come. The importance of bringing them up within the church was later realized but the procedure apparently was contrary to early apostolic practice, since tradition sought to justify the innovation by recalling that Jesus had overridden the apostles' views when he said: "Suffer the little children to come unto me: forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of God." During the first century most members of Christian communities—until the last quarter of the century certainly a large majority—had formerly been adherents of other religions, and it is quite unlikely that their past could be completely obliterated in making the transition from one communion to

another. This effect of past training was evident in the case of Palestinians like James and his conservative associates in Jerusalem, as well as in the case of Hellenists like Stephen, Paul, and Apollos. That the situation would be similar among gentile converts is intrinsically most probable. When they came into Christianity they would bring with them certain religious characteristics which would thus become a vital part of developing Christianity.

Under these circumstances we must answer our initial question in the affirmative. Christianity's contact with other religions even in gentile territory was so close and of such a character that it is most likely to have affected the lives of many Christians. The recognition of this fact is not a denial of all originality to Christianity, nor does it exclude the creative activity of individuals who felt themselves divinely guided in the work of giving to the world a new religion. One must not overlook the important part played by these forceful personalities who were sponsors for the new movement. Yet they were not historically unconditioned; nor did they live their religion in a vacuum. If the Twelve from the moment of their turning to Jesus, and Paul from the day of his conversion, had withdrawn completely from contact with men, they would still have possessed a religious legacy from the past. But their program was not one of isolation; they associated closely with their fellows in the common walks of life. While they displayed strongly original spiritual natures, they also reacted upon the immediate religious problems of their own day, becoming "all things to all

men" that they might by all means save some (I Cor. 9:22). Their new faith worked out its destiny in the arena of real life. As this scene of action was at first distinctly Jewish but soon became mainly gentile the probability of a genetic kinship between early Christianity and its religious environment, both Jewish and gentile, becomes a recognized fact.

Christianity's relation to Judaism has been investigated somewhat minutely, particularly in the last twenty-five years. But the study of Christianity's relation to Hellenistic religions is as yet in its infancy. If we may essay for a moment the rôle of prophet, we would venture to predict that New Testament research for perhaps the next quarter-century will be directed mainly toward this fascinating field.

Space will not permit so much as a bare outline of the whole religious situation in the Greco-Roman world of the first century A.D. We can consider but one item in this situation, the so-called mystery religions.

This term has come to be applied, in its technical sense, to a type of faith which emphasized the hope of future blessedness to be obtained by worshipping a deity, or deities, who themselves had triumphed over death and so were able to give their votaries a similar victory. In contrast with religions which were national in character, the Mysteries were individualistic, the individual attaching himself directly to the deity rather than to some national or civic group in order to obtain the help of the tutelary god. The Palestine Christians in so far as they required circumcision of gentile converts, thus making them Jews, were holding to the

national ideal; but when Paul conditioned salvation solely upon personal faith in Christ his position was of the mystery religion type. One became enrolled in the Mysteries through certain rites of initiation. Prominent among these was a pictorial exhibition of certain sacred things, a performance which usually assumed the character of a scenic display representing the deity's conquest over death. The priest, or preacher, expounded to the novice these so-called Mysteries, whence the name of this type of faith. The one to be initiated had previously observed stated rites of purification, and after initiation he took part in further ritualistic ceremonies such as eating the sacred meal, passing the night in the temple bed-chamber, or other acts which were thought to typify or secure union with the god. Thus the worshiper experienced a new birth. He was now a god-man, for the deity dwelt in him and controlled his life. Since he had passed into a new and holy state of existence he was sure of sharing the deity's own victory over death, and even in this life he enjoyed anticipations of future blessedness in the form of ecstatic experiences produced by the indwelling divine spirit.

When Christianity as preached by Paul broke away from its national moorings and became the religion of a purely personal faith in a dying and rising divine redeemer, belief in whom guaranteed one a blessed future, it was answering the same sort of religious need which the Mysteries were designed to meet. Consequently we are led to ask whether the early Christians, especially in gentile lands, were influenced in favor of the mystery type of faith

through contact with a world which was already working out its religious destiny along these lines.

To this question some modern scholars respond with an emphatic negative, as do Schweitzer and Clemen, to cite two of the most recent examples. They affirm that the mystery religions were not widely disseminated in the Mediterranean world in the first century A.D. and, further, in so far as they did exist at that time, they were not marked by those traits which later gave them a stronger resemblance to Christianity. To another group of investigators it seems clear that the mystery cults—or the great majority of them at least—had a wide vogue even in pre-Christian times, and that they had already assumed in the first century A.D. the main characteristics which marked their likeness to Christianity. In view of these assertions we must ask: (1) How widely were the Mysteries disseminated in the pre-Christian period? and (2) What were their chief characteristics at this time?

The best-known deities of these cults were Demeter and Dionysus (or Bacchus) in Greece, Cybele and Attis in Phrygia, Mithra in Persia, Ishtar and Tammuz in Babylonia, Atargatis and Hadad in Cilicia, Ashtart and Eshmun [or Adon]—the Aphrodite and Adonis of the Greeks—in Syria, and Isis, Osiris, and Serapis in Egypt. It is not practicable, however, at present to trace in detail the history and character of all these cults; we must content ourselves with a consideration of one or two of them.

The well-known Eleusinian mysteries centered about the figure of the great

mother-goddess, Demeter, whose worship is mentioned time and again by Greek writers before the beginning of our era. The same thing is true of the Dionysus cult, and of kindred religious movements in Greece. To cite some of the evidence, Herodotus (fourth century B.C.) has one of his characters explain to a Persian inquirer how very popular and powerful Demeter is and how numerous are the number of persons initiated into her mysteries (viii. 65). Other ancient testimony of the same sort is abundant. Nearer to Christian times, Cicero says that the most distant nations were initiated into the sacred and august Eleusinia. And further:

Much that is excellent and divine does Athens seem to me to have produced and added to our life, but nothing better than those mysteries by which we are formed and molded from a rude and savage life into humanity; and indeed in the mysteries we perceive the real principles of life and learn not only to live happily but to die with a fairer hope.

Another writer, Crinogoras, who belonged to the age of Augustus, exhorted his friend to visit Athens and see the sacred rites of Demeter even though he might not be able to travel anywhere else. The continued popularity of this cult is evidenced by Augustus' initiation in 21 B.C.; by Claudius' desire to transfer the Eleusinia to Rome about the middle of the first century A.D.; by Hadrian's initiation to the first grade in 125 A.D. and to the third in 129; and by a similar procedure in the case of other well-known persons. Other deities are also mentioned in connection with this same type of religion. Herodotus tells

us of the Scythian king's fondness for Greek manners, and especially of his initiation into the mysteries of Bacchus in which the god "took possession" of the king, the king was "maddened" by the god. Demosthenes (third century B.C.) taunts one of his opponents with worshipping the Phrygian Sabazius:

You assisted your mother in the initiations, you read aloud the ritual prayers, and took part in the rest of the plot. You put on the fawn skins for the candidates, you sprinkled them with water from the bowl, you purified and rubbed them with clay and bran, then you raised them from their purification and bade them say, "I have fled the bad and found the better."

We learn from a poem of the second century B.C. that even children were initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus. This poem, doubtfully ascribed to Theocritus, is written in honor of a boy nine years old whose right to initiation is justified by the piety of his father: "To the children of pious fathers belong the good things rather than to those that come of impious men." Compare Paul's belief in the sanctity of the children when even one parent is a Christian (I Cor. 7:14). In a similar vein the Orphic tablets say of the novitiate: "O blessed and happy one, thou hast put off thy mortality and hast become divine."

These more distinctly Greek mysteries were early supplemented by similar tendencies coming in from the Orient. Under Alexander's successors, and later under the Romans, national religions of the old type rapidly disappeared. The national deities of the ancient world lost caste when the dominions which they were supposed to protect fell a hopeless

prey first to the Greek and then to the Romans. But loss of prestige for these deities did not mean the abandonment of religion by the people; it meant rather the reconstruction of religious life and thinking along different lines. Instead of searching for a deity who could save a nation men began to look for a god who could save an individual. Various deities competed for first place in answer to this demand, and the result was a vigorous activity on the part of different oriental mystery cults in the Greco-Roman world.

Nor was this type of religion a new thing in Hellenistic times. Most of the redeemer-gods worshiped in this period had existed in some part of that ancient world from days of old. They had not always occupied a foremost place in the official pantheon of the different national faiths, but their rites were often very primitive in character. Their myths also reveal the important rôle which they had played in the early stages of civilization and the large place they held in popular esteem perhaps quite apart from, or in spite of, priestly official adjustments of various deities' relative positions. A god might be securely enthroned in the hearts of common men even though his standing among the Olympians was very doubtful.

These oriental mysteries offered a type of religion similar in many fundamental respects to the ancient mysteries of Greece, and they spread widely and became popular before the beginning of our era not only in the eastern Mediterranean lands but even in Rome. The Phrygian mother-goddess, Cybele, is mentioned by Pindar as known among

the Greeks in the sixth century B.C. Her consort, Attis, had a private cult in Greece as early as the fourth century B.C. and public worship of Attis was carried on there in the second century B.C. The Roman historian, Livy, writing in the time of Augustus, tells us that the worship of Cybele had been officially introduced into Rome in the year 204 B.C. in order to save the city from the Carthaginian invaders. The Romans were successful and Cybele, accordingly, was honored with a temple and from that time on her position was officially recognized at Rome. Attis must soon have joined her, for in the time of Claudius, before the middle of the first century A.D., the devotees of Cybele and Attis celebrated a yearly festival, under official patronage, at the time of the vernal equinox, in which the death of Attis, mourning for the dead god, and rejoicing at his resurrection constituted the prominent features of the ceremony. The worshipers performed various rites to symbolize or effect union with the deity, whose career was represented in a kind of mystery play. But this performance was not wholly new to Rome even in Claudius' day. Catullus, a century earlier, wrote a poem entitled "Atys," in which he described the ecstatic frenzy of the devotee who performed rites by which he took on the nature of the goddess, clothed himself in the divine garment, participated in the maddening dance, and became the avowed bondsman of Cybele forever. Thus the Cybele-Attis religion had reached out from its native Phrygian domains, gaining official recognition and support in the capital of the Roman Empire, while Christianity was still

making its first appearance in the homeland of the Cybele-Attis cult.

The Syrian Adonis was a prominent rival of Attis, and fostered almost identically the same type of religious belief and practice. The Adonis festival described by Theocritus as held at the court of Ptolemy II, early in the second century B.C., has many striking resemblances to the Attis festival of Claudius' day. But the question of genetic kinship does not interest us at present; we are seeking rather to discover the religious thought and feeling which lay behind the ceremony. Among the sacred things displayed were representations of Aphrodite and Adonis joined in wedlock, the death of the god, the mourning of the goddess, and Adonis' restoration to life. In the words of Theocritus, the musician at the sacred festival sings:[†]

The bridal bed for Adonis spread of my
own making is;
Cypris hath this for her wrapping, Adonis
that for his.
Of eighteen years or nineteen is turned the
rose-limbed groom;
His pretty lip is smooth to sip, for it bears
but flaxen bloom.
And now she's in her husband's arms, and
so we'll say good night;
But tomorrow we'll come with the dew, the
dew, and take hands and bear him away
Where plashing wave the shore doth lave,
and there with locks undight
And bosoms bare all shining fair will raise
this shrilling lay:
O sweet Adonis, none but thee of the chil-
dren of gods and men
'Twixt overworld and underworld doth pass
and pass again;

That cannot Agamemnon, nor the Lord o'
the Woeful Spleen [Ajax],
Nor the first of the twice ten children that
came of the Trojan queen [Hector],
Nor Patroclus brave, nor Pyrrhus bold
that home from the war did win,
Nor none o' the kith o' the old Lipith nor
of them of Deucalion's kin—
E'en Pelops' line lacks fate so fine, and
Pelagian Argos' pride.
Adonis sweet, Adonis dear,
Be gracious for another year;
Thou'rt welcome to thine own alway,
And welcome we'll both cry today
And next Adonis-tide.

When Paul two centuries later preached in the regions of Syria and Cilicia his message about the crucified and risen redeemer of Christian faith, the Adonis religion was still thriving, its two chief centers of worship being Byblos in Syria and Paphos in Cyprus. And we may safely assume that many members of Paul's gentile congregations were familiar with the mystic drama depicting the death of Adonis, the lamentation following his decease, the rejoicing at his resurrection, and shared the religious satisfaction which that faith gave to its votaries.

We shall draw our final illustration from the Isis-Osiris-Serapis cults. Their wide dissemination in the Hellenistic world is one of the most evident facts in the religious history of that period. Isis and Osiris are familiar figures in the religion of ancient Egypt, and their relation to one another is similar to that of Cybele and Attis, or Aphrodite and Adonis. The name of Serapis, which displaces, or rather absorbs, that of Osiris, was introduced by Ptolemy I

[†]Translated by J. M. Edmonds, *Greek Bucolic Poets*.

late in the third century B.C. when he virtually made this cult the official religion of Hellenistic Egypt. The genealogy of Serapis is very obscure, yet the cult of Isis-Serapis is essentially identical with that of the earlier Isis-Osiris, and the names of Osiris and Serapis are perpetuated side by side.

Herodotus doubtless could have given us much valuable information about the Egyptian mysteries had he not been himself so loyal a devotee of the mystery religions, and consequently so reverential toward their secrets. Yet he tells us some interesting things. Of the mysteries at Sais he says:

In the sacred precinct of Minerva [who corresponds to Isis] behind the chapel and joining the whole of the wall is the tomb of one whose name I consider it impious to divulge on this occasion. And in the inclosure stand large stone obelisks, and there is a lake near, ornamented with a stone margin, formed in a circle, and in size as appeared to me much the same as that in Delos, which is called the circular. In this lake they perform by night the representation of that person's adventures which they call *μυστήρια*, "Mysteries." On these matters, however, though accurately acquainted with the particulars of them, I must observe a discreet silence.

He is speaking, of course, about the career of the dying and rising Osiris. Again he says of Isis, that the second in importance of all the Egyptian festivals was held in her honor in the city of Busiris, situated in the middle of the Delta. In connection with this festival "all the men and women to the number of many myriads beat themselves after the sacrifice; but for whom they beat themselves it were impious for me to

divulge." We can easily guess "for whom"—the dead Osiris of course.

The wide spread of this religion outside of Egypt in pre-Christian times is well attested. Diodorus of Sicily in his *History* cites an inscription from a tomb of Isis and Osiris at Nysa in Arabia, and much the same language has also been found on an inscription from Ios. Tibullus in the year 29 (or 31) B.C., when compelled to abandon his military pursuits on account of sickness, writes from Corcyra to his fiancée, Delia, in Rome:

What does your Isis for me now, Delia? What avail me those brazen sistra of hers so often shaken by your hand? Or what am I the better for remembering that while you were pursuing her rites you bathed purely and lay alone in a pure bed [signifying marriage union with the deity]? Now, now goddess, help me, for that man may be healed by thee is proved by many a picture in thy temples.

Writing a couple of years earlier in commemoration of Messala's birthday, Tibullus refers also to Osiris as thoroughly familiar to the Romans. The mention of a Serapeum in a city ordinance of Pozzuoli in 105 B.C. shows that the Serapis cult likewise traveled to Italy at an early date. Thus the Egyptian mystery religions spread in Italy despite the opposition—due in some measure perhaps to Rome's jealousy of Alexandria—which was raised against them, for they anticipated Christianity in incurring Roman persecution, records of which we have for the years 59, 58, 53, 48 B.C., and 19 A.D. Yet, like Christianity a century later, they seemed only to thrive the more for opposition.

Also in the East, Egyptian mysteries

spread extensively from the beginning of the third century B.C. on. In the time of Ptolemy Soter the worship of both Isis and Serapis was established at Athens, the latter having a temple at the foot of the Acropolis. In the regions round about the Levant the worship of these gods enjoyed undisturbed prosperity for three hundred years before Paul appeared upon the scene.

The general character of the Egyptian mysteries is the same as that of the Cybele-Attis, or the Aphrodite-Adonis cults. The story of Osiris' death and resurrection, and his significance for the life of the believer, are essentially the same as in the case of similar deities. Here again we find a mother goddess personifying the source of life, and associated with her a consort who impersonates the hope of triumph in the ever-present human struggle of life over death. Plutarch, a Greek interpreter of the Isis-Osiris religion, writing at approximately the same period when the fourth evangelist wrote his gospel interpreting Christianity to the Greeks, says of Isis:

She is the female principle of nature and that which is capable of receiving all generation in virtue of which she is styled by Plato "nurse" and "all-receiving," but by people in general she is called the "one of numberless names" because she is converted by the logos [that is, Osiris, who is identified with the Logos, the Word] into and receives all appearances and forms.

In fact, Osiris in his Logos-function, according to Plutarch, brought the world and all it contains into being (*Is. and Os. liv*). Furthermore, Plutarch interprets the mourning for Osiris and the celebration of his resurrection as symbolic of the death and revival of nature,

but he also sees in this triumph something which is—"spiritual," shall we say, and cosmic. Hence its redemptive significance. To use his own words:

But the avenger of Osiris [i.e., Isis] . . . did not forget the contests and struggles she had gone through, nor yet her own wanderings, nor did she suffer oblivion and silence to envelop her many deeds of wisdom, many feats of courage, but by intermingling in the most sacred ceremonies, images, hints, and representations of her sufferings of yore, she consecrated at one and the same time both lessons of piety and consolation for men and women when overtaken by misfortune. And she, together with Osiris, having been translated from the rank of good spirits [demons] up to that of gods by means of their virtue . . . receive not inappropriately the united honors of gods and of spirits everywhere, both in the regions above the earth and in those under ground, possessing the supreme power (xxviii).

Perhaps Plutarch was the first to expound the significance of Isis and Osiris in these particular terms, though that is by no means certain, but for generations devotees of these gods had been observing these sacred ceremonies of the cult, nourishing piety upon, and deriving consolation from, the memory of these deities' sufferings, and worshiping them with hearts more or less full of appreciation and reverence according to the capacity of the worshiper. This was the situation in many a community before Paul appeared preaching his suffering redeemer, "placarded before the eye crucified" (Gal. 3:1), who in virtue of his humility and self-sacrifice for man's welfare had been highly exalted to his heavenly reward and given an authority to which every knee should bow of

things in the heaven, and things on earth and things under ground (Phil. 2:5-10).

From this hasty survey let us draw what seem to be the natural and legitimate conclusions. We are forced to affirm that the Mysteries were widely disseminated in pre-Christian times and that they occupied a very important place in religious life. And, further, it seems clear that many of their central conceptions, such as the expectation of a blessed immortality through attachment to a savior who himself died but overcame death in his resurrection, anticipated some things which were strongly emphasized in Christianity. Doubtless many disciples of the mystery gods were converted to Christianity, and there found, in the mystery staged so vividly by Paul in his word-painted portrait of the drama on the cross, a greater satisfaction than they had been able to derive from faith in Attis, Adonis, or Osiris. On the other hand, it is not improbable that Christianity on gentile soil was influenced by the Mysteries through the very necessity of becoming acclimated in that religious zone. I have not, to be sure, discussed whether Paul borrowed this or that idea or phrase from the Mysteries, for such questions seem to me quite incapable of yielding intelligible answers unless we treat them in the light of the more general situation. It is this latter which I have tried to portray. Indeed the primary problem is not how many static items other religions may have supplied to Christians, but rather how far the motives for religious living, and the standards by which religious values and ideals were estimated—for these are the forces

which really determine doctrine and practice in the first instance—were brought over by Christian converts from other faiths, or were inspired by contact with other religions on the mission field. In this respect we believe that contemporary religions, and particularly the Mysteries, did contribute something to the making of Christianity in the first century of its career.

Shall we say, then, that Paul for example created his Christianity by deliberately appropriating a series of items first from one source and then from another, at last welding these promiscuous materials together as best he could into something which might look like a unit in itself? Most certainly not. Paul's religion was no such artificial creation; it was an affair of real life, a product of many vital forces which intermingled in the making of his experience. And since the Mysteries occupied a prominent place in his world they exerted their proportionate share of influence upon his life. Because his lot was cast in a time and in regions where the religious life of humanity was employing this coinage to estimate its values, because the human spirit in that day was working out its problems along these lines, Paul's religion also shows this coloring. Nor need we say that he was simply stooping to accommodate himself to his age; rather he was imbibing its atmosphere, growing strong in faith and mighty in spiritual stature as he worshiped and served his crucified and risen redeemer in the language and under the inspirations furnished by the religious world of his day.

That we may more truly appreciate—perhaps indeed respect—the attainments

of the religious spirit in that ancient world, let me quote the dedicatory prayer of one who has just been initiated into the mysteries of Isis. Though it comes to us in a literary document of the second century A.D.,¹ there is no reason to think that many a devotee of this much-revered goddess had not cherished similar sentiments centuries earlier.

The novitiate prays:

Thou, O holy and perpetual preserver of the human race, always munificent in cherishing mortals, dost bestow the sweet affection of a mother on the misfortunes of the wretched. Nor is there any day or night, nor so much as the minutest particle of time, which passes unattended by thy bounties. Thou dost protect men both by sea and land, and, dispersing the storms of life, dost extend thy health-giving right hand, by which thou dost unravel the inextricably entangled threads of the Fates, and dost assuage the tempests of fortune and restrain the malignant influences of the stars. The gods of heaven adore thee; thou dost roll the sphere of the universe

round the steady poles, thou dost illuminate the sun, thou dost govern the universe, thou dost tread the realms of Tartarus. The stars move responsive to thy command, the gods rejoice in thy divinity, the seasons return by thy appointment, and the elements are thy servants. At thy nod the breezes blow, the clouds are nurtured, the seeds germinate, and the blossoms increase. The birds as they hover through the air, the wild beasts as they roam on the mountains, the serpents that hide in the earth, and the monsters that swim in the sea are terrified at the majesty of thy presence. But I so weak in capacity for celebrating thy praises, and possessing such slender means for offering sacrifices, have far from eloquence sufficient to express all that I conceive of thy majesty. Not a thousand mouths, and tongues as many, not an eternal flow of unwearyed speech, would be equal to the task. I will, therefore, use my utmost endeavors to do what, poor as I am, still one truly religious may do—I will figure to myself thy divine countenance and will ever preserve this most holy divinity locked up in the deepest recesses of my breast.

¹ Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, xi.